

May 2, 2025

The plot to steal Abraham Lincoln's body

The plot to steal Abraham Lincoln's body was a bizarre and audacious scheme hatched in 1876, just 11 years after his assassination. A Chicago crime boss named "Big Jim" Kennally orchestrated the plan to ransom Lincoln's remains for the release of his imprisoned engraver, Benjamin Boyd, and \$200,000 (equivalent to over \$5.5 million today).

Kennally recruited two men, Terrence Mullen and Jack Hughes, to break into Lincoln's tomb in Springfield, Illinois. They were joined by Lewis Swegles, who they believed was a skilled grave robber but was actually a Secret Service informant. The gang's plan was to steal Lincoln's cedar-and-lead coffin and hide it in Indiana's sand dunes, where shifting sands would cover their tracks.

On November 7, 1876, the day of the presidential election, the thieves attempted the heist. They

broke into Lincoln's tomb but struggled to lift the 500-pound coffin. Meanwhile, Secret Service agents and detectives, tipped off by Swegles, were lying in wait. The thieves fled when they realized they were caught.

The failed plot highlighted the need for better security at Lincoln's tomb and shaped the early role of the Secret Service. It's a story that feels almost too absurd to be true, yet it remains a fascinating chapter in American history.